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AUTHOR Vardell, Sylvia M.; Burris, Nancy A.
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ABSTRACT

A study examined the use and understanding of literary elements by students in grades 3, 6, 9, and 12. Students read L. Peck's folktale, "Coyote's Gift to Turkey Girl," and wrote a story of their own. The stories were then analyzed for their objective content (genre conventions, characterization, plot, and setting) and subjective content (kind and quality of literary elements). The folktale genre was used in 56% of the stories, and the incidence of folktales increased with grade level. The number of characters in a story also increased with grade level. Stereotypical folktale settings were found in 60% of all the stories. Third-grade students created flat characters 78% of the time, while students in other grades created stereotypical characters 40-50% of the time. In creating story settings, 75% of third graders used implicit settings, but from sixth grade on, approximately 70% of the students created explicit settings. The majority of third-grade stories (69%) contained no suspense, while the majority of the rest (60-70%) contained some suspense. Stories were also evaluated holistically on three measures (character, story development, and overall story quality). Eighty percent of third-grade stories were evaluated as weak, while 50% of the rest were judged satisfactory or excellent. These results reveal a correlation between students' maturity and the quality of their reading and writing, and suggest that story writing and literary appreciation are developmental processes. (SRT)

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Learning to Write:
A Developmental/Literary Perspective

Sylvia M. Vardell
University of Houston-Victoria

Nancy A. Burris
Northside Independent School District

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Abstract

The use and understanding of literary elements by students in grades three, six, nine and twelve were studied. Students' responses to reading a folktale and writing a folktale were compared across grades and between reading and writing processes. Results showed significant differences across grade levels in students' understanding of literary elements in a folktale. Students at all grade levels were able to supply examples of common elements in folktales. Significant differences were also found across grade levels in the kind and quality of literary elements used in student authored folktales. An increasing number of elements show a statistically significant correlation in reading and writing tasks as students mature.

Learning to Write:

A Developmental/Literary Perspective

How can we investigate readers' understanding of a genre and their use of that knowledge to create stories? Rosenblatt (1985) suggests that it is the transaction of reader and text that provides the meaning for a text. The mental literary structure a reader brings to a text is one of the elements of story schema research, which examines how stories are understood and recalled (Mandler, 1984; Stein & Policastro, 1984). Knowledge of how stories are structured is one of the major elements in comprehending a story. Applebee (1978) outlined the changes in children's understanding of stories; not only do the concepts of a story change as children grow, but knowledge of the elements used in literature increases and affects responses to stories (Galda, 1982; Rubin & Gardiner (1985).

Smith (1982) suggested that writers learn the intangibles they know about writing stories and other forms through reading. Research in the connection betwen reading and writing has focused on the variables of reading achievement or the amount of reading experience and on writing ability or syntactic complexity (Strotsky, 1983). Although research in children's composing of early "literary efforts" has been developing (Britton, 1970; Calkins, 1982; Graves, 1983; Nodine, Barenbaum and Newcomer, 1985), the research in response to literature has generally been based on oral responses (Galda, 1983). The potential links

between reading, composing, and responding to literature, however, are still largely unexplored.

A synthesis of these strands of research suggests that studies which examine students' responses to reading and writing a literary text could provide further information for learning how students develop in their ability to construct and interpret textual meaning. Studying the interaction of the response process with the acts of reading and writing adds a new dimension to existing research. The study reported here was designed to extend the research on the development in use and understanding of literary conventions in children's reading and writing done by Vardell (1983). Her study examined responses to and writing in the mystery genre. The current study focused on the folktale genre and investigated developmental differences in students' story writing.

Method

Subjects

One class at each of the following grade levels participated: third, sixth, ninth, twelfth. Classes were nominated by language arts supervisors and were average distributions of high, medium and low ability students, who were enrolled in an urban South Texas school district. The final analysis includes data from 14 to 18 subjects at each grade level. A total of 66 subjects participated.

Materials

The story, "Coyote's Gift to Turkey Girl" (Peck, 1942) was used to study students' responses to literary elements in a folktale. This native American Indian story is a variant of the Cinderella tale and contains several of the familiar motifs: step-sisters going to the dance, younger sister left at home to work, the helper who provides festive garments and the warning to return home by a certain hour.

The story was selected because it contains literary elements and motifs students may have encountered, while having the advantage of not being familiar. The Response Questionnaires included items such as "Could these things really happen? Explain," "Is there anything in this story that reminds you of other stories you have read?" The Pre-Writing Exercise required subjects to brainstorm and list examples for each of the following categories: "Many folktales include a princess. List other people you find in folktales," "List the kinds of problems people have in folktales," "List magic charms or special helpers you might find in folktales," "Describe how the problems might finally be solved."

Procedure

The study was conducted by the researchers in three non-consecutive class sessions during a two week period. In the first session students were asked to read the story, "Coyote's Gift to Turkey Girl."

The second session began with the Pre-Writing Exercise which was designed to generate ideas for writing a tale and to explore basic knowledge of folktale structure. Students were encouraged to remember folktales they had heard or read, then to list as many examples as they could of different kinds of literary aspects of the genre. Following the prewriting activity, students began composing their own tales. The final session allowed students to revise or polish their stories.

Final drafts of the folktales written by students in the study were analyzed by a panel of judges using an objective content analysis scheme which counted characters, plot conventions, setting and genre conventions. Students' stories were then analyzed using a subjective content analysis instrument which examined the kind and quality of literary elements used. The student produced stories will be this article's focus for discussion.

Writing Tales

All subjects at all grade levels were able to provide appropriate examples in each of the categories included in the prewriting exercise which explored the basic knowledge of folktale structure.

Objective Content Analysis

The objective content analysis focused on four elements: genre conventions, characterization, plot and setting. Genre conventions included: genre type, story opening, narrative technique, story ending, genre subtypes and variants, and use of language.

The folktale genre was used in 56% of all the stories and the incidence of folktales increased over the grades. The conventional folktale introduction, "Once upon a time," occurred most frequently in the stories of third and sixth grade students, 94% and 100% respectively, although the incidence was high in the upper grades: 79% in the ninth grade and 67% in the twelfth. All students used the third person narrative storytelling technique. The traditional "happily ever after" ending concluded 30% of the stories written by third, sixth and twelfth graders, but 85% of the ninth grade writers ended their stories this way.

The sub-categories of folktales suggested by Huck (1979) were also used in the analysis. The "wonder tale" (using the magic and supernatural) was the type most often created,(56% of all compositions) although "beast tales" (animals act and talk like humans), "pour quoi tales" (explanations of animal characteristics or customs of people) and "realistic" stories were also produced.

Variants of the Cinderella story appeared at all grade levels and a few "Cinderfellow" stories, which contained male protagonists were found. Fables and a myth also were created.

The use of language in student story writing was considered as a part of the genre conventions analysis. Dialogue was present in almost half of all the stories and occurred at all grade levels. Not until the twelfth grade did students incorporate chants, rhymes, jargon or dialect, and then in only a few stories.

Other literary elements analyzed in subjects' stories were characterization, plot, and setting. The number of characters in a story increased over the grade levels. Twelfth grade students created almost twice as many characters as did third grade students. Familiar character motifs, such as the fair young maid, wicked stepmother, fairy godmother, hero and royalty appeared at most grade levels. Elves, witches, wizards, a nomad, a cat with mystical powers and tiny people also populated these stories. Only the senior level students included the clever trickster and young brother or sister motifs.

Several traditional plot motifs were used by students at all grades. The most common was the use of the significant "three" of the folktale genre. There were stories based on three wishes, as well as one entitled "Three Rich Pigs". In a story set in the Tennessee mountains, "Granny Pickles" uses three different potions before she spins around three times to complete her magic spell. The tale of the "Princess and the Bandana" used a ring, a necklace and a bandana as the means for rescuing the young maid. One student used three chapters to tell the story of Gerimine seeking his lost love, Pelery. The long sleep, transformations, magic powers and magic objects were also plot devices in the stories

written by students.

The depiction of setting was also systematically analyzed. The stereotype folktale setting, including such elements as kingdom, forest, etc. was found in 60% of all the stories. Another 30% of the stories were given contemporary settings, while local settings were identified in 6% of the stories written by sixth, ninth and twelfth grade students. In all but one story, the writers placed the action in the past. One sixth grade writer, who was caught up in the future, set his story in 8200 on the planet, Mican. When reminded that the assignment was to write a folktale, he created a time machine that sent the major character and his laser gun back to 52 B.C. where Artemis and Roman soldiers were encountered.

Subjective Content Analysis

Students' stories were then analyzed in terms of the kind and quality of literary elements used. Using Chi square analysis, significant differences were found across the grades for all variables including characterization, setting, plot and theme

Using Luken's guidelines in A Critical Handbook of Children's Literature (1986), characters were analyzed as being either flat (fixed, not integrated with the action and traits listed without substantiation), or stereotyped (description relied on traits of group or type) or round (fully developed, dynamic relation to action). A major shift occurred between the third grade students, who created flat characters, 78% of the time, (e.g. a princess that was turned into a snake,) and the other grades, which

presented stereotyped characters, such as "The boy's name was Cinderfellow", 40-50% of the time. The occurrence of round characters showed a progressive increase from grade three to twelve, where one twelfth grade student characterized Old Man Harry as "everyone's friend, who always seemed to be around when something went wrong and somehow or another he would make that wrong thing right."

In creating the story setting, 75% of the third graders had implicit settings. Often the setting was implied only by "Once upon a time". From the sixth grade on, approximately 70% of the students created explicit settings, such as "the dark castle at the edge of the forest."

The development of plot was another important element of students' stories. The following sub-elements of plot were analyzed: suspense (none, some, or a lot), climax (no definable peak, occurs early, occurs with ending, or rising action with resolution) and ending (epilogue, unrealistic, surprise, abrupt, or natural). The majority of the third grade stories (69%) contained no suspense, while the majority of sixth, ninth and twelfth grade stories (60-70%) included some suspense, as in the "The Three Rich Pigs" story presented below. Stories with a lot of suspense were developed in only a few stories (10-20%) by sixth through twelfth graders. For the element of climax, plots which had a climax occurring simultaneously with the end of the story or followed by a resolution, were found in 52% of the stories developed by third graders, while 70-80% of the sixth through

twelfth graders were able to create these type of endings, as did the ninth grade author who resolved the three part saga of Gerimine and Pelery as follows:

> Gerimine had been in the dungeon for two years when Pelery finaly (sic) persuaded her father to let him go. Gerimine had to promise to marry Pelery befor (sic) he was released, and he did with great pleasure.

The thematic element was usually implicit in all student's stories. Not until twelfth grade was there a significant inclusion of explicit theme. At that grade level 25% of the stories presented an explicit message, as in the pour quoi tale featured below on "how we got our first Teddy Bear."

Students' stories were also evaluated using a holistic scoring procedure to assess the overall quality of writing. Chi square analysis revealed significant differences across grade levels for all three variables: Characterization, story development and overall quality (^{2} 44.75, p <.00). Each of these variables was scored as being either weak, satisfactory or excellent. Although 80% of the third grade stories were judged to be weak on all three variables, there was a developmental trend from third through twelfth grade moving toward excellence. Approximately 25% of the stories written by twelfth grade students were judged as excellent for all three variables.

Story Profiles

To summarize, a typical third grade story contained flat characterization, implicit setting, no suspense and 50% of the time included a climax at the end of the story or a climax followed by a resolution. A story written by a sixth grader had

stereotyped characters, an explicit setting and some suspense. These writers used a climax at the end of their stories or one followed by a resolution 80% of the time. The pattern for the ninth grade stories was very similar to that of the sixth, with the exception that ninth graders more consistently presented a resolution following the climax of their stories, 85% ending with "they lived happily ever after." By contrast, twelfth grade writers used stereotyped and round characters with equal facility. Other significant differences included an explicit theme present in 25% of the stories. More than 20% of the twelfth grade students achieved an holistic rating of excellent in their story writing.

Reading the actual stories written by the students brings the discussion of percentages, significance levels and developmental trends into clearer focus. A representative story which contains most of the typical elements found at each level is presented below:

THIRD GRADE

Once apou a tine their was a prince that was turned into a snake. That was going to get married the next day. She did not know what she was going to do. she was going to do. She saw some elvfs. They said well help you. She said what can you do. We know the serict to turn you back into a prince. They said it will take a while to get the stuff. We need two rocks one cat hair pumpkin 9 flowers. they went to go get the stuffs. They put the stuff in a bowl. It was done in one hour. They poured it one her and it worded. So she got married after all.

SIXTHGRADE

The Three Rich Pigs

Once upon a time there were three little pigs who lived together in a little house. One day the three little pigs got a message telling that one of their relatives died and they would get all of his money. Now they were three rich little pigs. Their first idea was to move out of the little house and move into a mansion. Well the fox found out about this and he always wanted to be rich and live in a mansion. So a thought came to his mind it was to marry one of the pigs. So he goes to the first pig and asked will you marry me. The pigs NO!! So he went to the second pigs house she also said NO!! So he went to the third pig and instead of asking the rich pig he asked the maid. But she said yes he was so happy until he found out she wasn't the rich pig. So he started to leave But the maid said you can't leave you're my husband. So he became the butler. But still got to live in the mansion.

NINTH GRADE

I

In the dark castle at the edge of the forest, there lived the evil king Borg, and his beautiful daughter Pelery. The princess was locked in the castle and was forbade to leave, because of he grate beauty.

One day, during the kings nap, some of the staff in the castle took Pelery away from the castle. Gerimine the princesses' suitor was very upset. He wandered from town to town, trying to find his loved one.

In the town of Malery, Gerimine met a weary nomad named Zeake, who said that he could find Pelery. The prince asked this wanderer how he came by knowing the name of the person he was looking for, but the nomad started to walk in the other direction.

"How much do you want your beloved princess" asked the nomad. Gerimine answered in a quick tone, I want her to be back and safe in my arms, more than anything.

2

The nomad gave Gerimine a golden necklace, with a pendant set with a finely cut saphire ruby. "As you get near to Pelery, the ruby will glow a darker red, but rememberer this," the nomad said, "if you take the princess back to the castle, both of you shall live

together in happiness. "If you decide, to live on your own," added the nomad, "you shall not live in total freedom.

Gerimine looked down at the pendant and the nomad disapeared. As the prince turned around to go to the market square, the pendant started to glow a darker red, and it kept getting darker and darker. When a hay cart went by the pendant stoped glowing. They cart stoped at the taveren, then Gerimine searched the cart, and found his beloved Pelery.

Gerimine had forgot what the nomad had told him in all the excitement, and took Pelery to a small village. There they lived happily for eight and a half years in perfect harmony.

3

King Borg sent out his own search parties for his daughter. The last search party had found Pelery and Gerimine. The king had Gerimine imprisoned for plotting the kidnapping and paying the servants for their job.

Gerimine had been in the dungeon for two years when Pelery finaly persuaded her father to let him go. Gerimine had to promise to marry Pelery befor he was released, and he did with great pleasure.

The End

TWELFTH GRADE

The Bear

Somewhere in mountains in Tennessee along time ago, there lived a family of four. This family consisted of Potbelly Pa, Bowlegged Ma and Slapjack and Slowjane, the kids. One day as Bowlegged Ma was tending to the washin' she heard a loud clatter back behind the house. Goin' out to investigate she found a big grizzly bear chug-a-luggin' all of the family's brew. Brew is a homemade concoction used for curing all ailments, it is also good for removing rust off of their big cast iron stove except their brew is so mighty powerful that it has made a few holes in the stove. Well to go with this story, Ma just stood there next to the porch watching this bear drink down his third jug of brew. Then from around the house came Slapjack carryin' a load of taters he had dug up from their garden and followin' not far behind was Slowjane draggin' her favorite doll, Janie Lou. Ma told them to fetch their Pa from out front. By

the time Pa got there that bear had drank six whole jugs of brew and was gettin' awful drunk. Pa, Ma, Slapjack and Slowjane just stood there watchin' that bear start his seventh jug, which he never finished cuz he passed out. Ma and Pa then tried to move the bear, but it was no use that bear weighed more than Two Ton Tina their neighbor across the way. Then Pa told Slapjack to run up and fetch Granny Pickles, because everyone knew Granny Pickles had strange powers, like the time she made it rain frogs in the middle of Farmer Tim's pasture. Well anyhow Slapjack got Granny Pickles to come. She came totin' her magic bag which is filled with different pills and such. Ma and Pa told her their problem. She went over and looked at that bear, she punched around on him, lookin' to see how solid he was, then takin' from her bag a large jar of pink powder she sprinkled it all over the bear. then she withdrew a large jug of blue liquid that she poured over him. Now she said for all of us to blow on this to dry it. After is was dry she took out of her bag a small red tablet which she placed in the bears mouth, she closed her eyes spun around 3 times and said that was it. But the bear was still there. She told Pa to let Slowjane have the bear. "What!" said Pa "she is just a baby." "No" said Granny Pickles "the bear is just a stuffed animal," and so he was and Slowjane named him Teddy. And that is how we got our first Teddy Bear.

Discussion

The prewriting exercise revealed that as early as third grade all of the students in this study could name typical characters appearing in folktales, could recall at least on familiar plot, magic charms or special helpers, and how a plot might be resolved. However, when these findings are compared with responses to related items on both the reading and writing response questionnaires, it is evident that students are not always able to transfer general knowledge to specific folktales.

The subjective content analysis of student authored stories revealed significant differences across the grades in terms of the kind and quality of the literary elements used and the overall

quality of the stories written. The literary elements of character development, setting, plot, suspense and climax showed major shifts in writing skill between third and sixth grade. At all grade levels, 70% or more of the students supplied surprise, realistic or conventional endings. Implicit themes were found in 90% or more of the stories at grades three, six and nine, however, at the twelfth grade 26% of the stories had explicit themes.

When the scores for holistic assessment are considered, the shift from third grade, where more than 80% of the stories were evaluated as weak on all three measures (character, story development and overall story quality) to sixth grade and above where 50% or more of the stories were judged satisfactory or excellent, suggests a developmental change. However, this finding may also indicate the usual criteria used for determining an "excellent" story composition may rely heavily upon an adult understanding and appreciation of quality literature. That is to say, the false assumption is often made that "good" writing is mature writing, without consideration for what may be developmentally appropriate.

This study was designed to replicate Vardell's (1983) descriptive study of the use and understanding of literary elements in both reading and writing mystery stories. Again, the focus was on investigating developmental differences in a naturalistic setting rather than on providing instruction. The research reported here has examined the same literary elements

using the folktale genre. The relationship between reading literature, composing, and responding to literature is still not clear, although a strong interaction is indicated. These two studies of students' understanding of literary types and elements suggest that when reading and writing are paired, students can articulate the elements of the literary genre examined, as well as the conventions that commonly appear in the particular genre, and are able to manipulate these in their own compositions with an increased sense of literary intention.

Story writing and literary appreciation as revealed in responses to literature are developmental processes. It is important for teachers to be aware of this as young writers gain experience understanding and controlling the literary elements in a genre. It is essential to realize that good writing is not necessarily more mature writing; sixth grade students are going to write as sixth graders. When teacher expectations are developmentally appropriate, they can offer strong support to growing writers.

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